

# Time to calm the rhetoric and forge a compromise

**T**he sadness for Dale Farm is that the situation has been allowed to go so far. What began as a planning dispute is now threatening to descend into pitched battle, if the forcible clearance of the 10-year-old Travellers' site goes ahead.

The rhetoric is dramatic, to say the least. On one side stand local residents and Basildon Council, who maintain that Dale Farm is illegal. On the other are the 80 Traveller families who live there, plus high-profile supporters such as Vanessa Redgrave and a motley collection of activists. Dale Farm supporters invoke human rights, and their children's entitlement to a home and an education. Opponents talk emotively about their own rights as law-abiding citizens, the sanctity of the Green Belt and equality before the law.

In such a heated atmosphere, what is needed above all is an element of pragmatism. The concerns of local residents should not be trivialised; the law is on their side. But the spectacle of families physically shielding their homes from bulldozers as the council spends £13m to clear them is difficult to defend.

There are possible compromises. One would be to revisit the planning application

for Dale Farm. The site was bought legally and has permission for half its development. Whether officially Green Belt or not, it was a scrap yard before the Travellers came, not a beauty spot. Alternatively, Basildon must find another suitable site. The council maintains it has fulfilled its duty by proposing other living arrangements for Dale Farm residents. But it has offered only houses; Travellers traditionally do not live in fixed homes and should not be forced to do so.

That said, Dale Farm must not be allowed

— Planning rules must not be allowed to stand proxy for a proper debate about Britain's Travellers

to set a precedent. Basildon Council is right to maintain that planning laws must apply to all if they apply to any. And with an estimated 3,600 illegal Traveller sites across the country, it is neither practical nor right for all to be indiscriminately waved through.

As regards Dale Farm, any deal must include both suitable compensation for local residents affected by a permanent Traveller

site on their doorsteps – if that is what ensues – and sustained efforts to build bridges between the two communities. More important, the fracas in Essex must focus government minds on devising a coherent response to a problem that will not end with Dale Farm.

Ultimately, the dilemma is not simply about planning. It is about how modern Britain accommodates unconventional lifestyles. The traditional itinerant Gypsy life is already all but impossible. Now, after decades of half-measures by successive governments, there are simply not enough places for Travellers to live – hence situations such as Dale Farm.

The solution ought to be obvious: find more sites where Travellers can live legally. Regrettably, the Coalition is going in the wrong direction, abandoning the last government's targets that made local authorities provide suitable land, just as they were starting to work. Mood music from the Prime Minister is equally discouraging. But when David Cameron talks of the unfairness of laws that apply to everyone but Travellers, he dodges the issue. Planning rules should not be allowed to stand proxy for a proper debate about the long-term accommodation of Britain's Travellers. Otherwise, Dale Farm is just the beginning.

## An entente once again cordiale

**THE PRIME** Minister will today chair an international meeting hosted by the French President in Paris. How often could that sentence have been written in the past decade? That it can be written now is a measure of the thoroughly welcome improvement in cross-Channel relations over recent months.

In one respect, this new *entente* is more evidence of how hard the Government, in its Libya intervention, has tried to avoid the mistakes of Iraq. France and Britain together took the diplomatic lead at the UN and the military lead at Nato. Eight years ago relations between London and Paris were at a nadir, with British officials openly – and wrongly – savaging President Chirac for supposedly sabotaging British diplomacy, and the French embassy in London was bombarded with hate-mail.

But it is also to be hoped that this Franco-British amity reflects something bigger: a belated recognition, perhaps, that in this age of globalisation and economic austerity, Britain and France have mutual interests in security, as in much else, that are most successfully addressed together. If it has taken two centre-right politicians with firm ideas about national sovereignty to see that, so be it.

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